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THE UNITED STATES MILITARY  
and  
HUMANITARIAN OPERATIONS

Core Course 5 Essay

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## The U.S. Military and Humanitarian Operations

"The purpose of the Armed Forces in the Post-Cold War Era must be viewed in light of a broader mission than simply to fight the nation's wars."<sup>1</sup>

"Humanitarian assistance operations may in fact become the most common mission of the future"<sup>2</sup>

### INTRODUCTION

Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has employed its military on a dozen occasions to provide humanitarian assistance at home and abroad to victims of man-made and natural disasters. In FY94 alone, sixty countries benefitted from humanitarian assistance provided by the Department of Defense.<sup>3</sup> These humanitarian operations and other deployments for "operations other than war" have led military officers and defense experts to question the impact such operations have on the military's readiness now and future ability successfully to fulfill its primary mission: deter aggression and defend the nation -- fight and win the nation's wars. Humanitarian operations use resources and preempt the training military forces need to be ready to fight. On the other hand, often only the military has the capabilities needed to provide emergency humanitarian assistance.

The U.S. Government is in the process of reinventing itself in order to become a more effective organization. In that context, this paper will examine what role, if any, the U.S. military should play in providing emergency humanitarian assistance at home and abroad. It will examine the current structure for providing such relief, discuss options for future military involvement and conclude with a recommendation for further consideration.

## HISTORIC ROLE of the MILITARY in NON-TRADITIONAL OPERATIONS

"The use of military personnel to provide humanitarian assistance is not a new phenomenon. The earliest recorded instances took place before the time of Alexander the Great."<sup>4</sup> Indeed, "There are almost no conceivable roles in this new phase of our history that the (U.S.) Armed Forces have not performed in the past."<sup>5</sup> The Army was instrumental in building infrastructure needed for settlement of the western United States as well as in constructing the Panama Canal, running the Depression-era Civilian Conservation Corps and supporting the CORDS development program in Vietnam.

## CURRENT SITUATION

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) is charged with organizing the Federal Government's response to disasters and emergencies within the United States. Authority for this Federal role is embodied in the Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act (P.L. 93-288 as amended by P.L. 100-707). FEMA fulfills this responsibility through the Federal Response Plan (FRP). Twenty-seven government departments, commissions and agencies as well as the American Red Cross are committed to support the plan under FEMA's overall coordination and direction.

The core of the FRP consists of twelve Emergency Support Functions (ESFs). There is one lead agency responsible for each ESF. The Army Corps of Engineers is currently responsible for ESF #3 -- Public Works and Engineering. Until this year, the

Department of Defense had been the lead for ESF #9 -- Urban Search and Rescue and a supporting agency for all other ESFs.<sup>6</sup> FEMA is supposed to reimburse agencies for all but their personnel costs incurred in emergency response efforts out of a disaster relief fund appropriated and supplemented annually by Congress.<sup>7</sup>

In the domestic disaster response system, the Federal Government provides assistance only when requested by the states and only to supplement state and local efforts. When the President declares a Federal Disaster Area, FEMA designates a Federal Coordinating Officer (FCO) who calls upon ESF lead agencies for support as needed. When the Department of Defense is called upon to provide assistance, the chain of command runs from the Secretary of Defense to the Secretary of the Army to the Director of Military Support (DOMS), who identifies needed units. DOMS coordinates with the Chairman and the Joint Staff, which instruct the Specified and Unified Commands to provide the required support.<sup>8</sup> ACOM (PACOM for Alaska and Hawaii) appoint Defense Coordinating officers to work with FEMA's FCOs and state officials.

The Military Support to Civil Authorities (MSCA) policy is to provide Department of Defense resources "only when response or recovery requirements are beyond the capabilities of civil authorities."<sup>9</sup> Also, military operations other than MSCA will generally have priority. FEMA is now relying less on the military.<sup>10</sup> This is reflected in the transfer for lead responsibility for ESF-9 (Urban Search and Rescue) from Defense to FEMA this year. FEMA is also finding it cheaper and faster to use

the Department of Transportation to charter commercial aircraft resources rather than call on military airlift.<sup>11</sup>

Response to disasters overseas is organized in a similar manner. Instead of FEMA, the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) in the Agency for International Development has the primary responsibility for coordinating the U.S. Government's response. Military involvement can occur as the result of an OFDA request for support or presidential decision. The chain of command for humanitarian operations overseas runs from the Secretary of Defense through the Chairman/Joint Staff to the Regional CINCS. Coordination in Washington and in the field is done on an informal interagency basis, and is often complicated by the participation of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) of various nationalities.

Even though natural disasters might not be more numerous in the future, they are likely to be more deadly because of population growth and environmental degradation in precisely those countries least able to prepare for and recover from natural events.<sup>12</sup> The need for U.S. assistance will thus most likely increase. Of the 30 joint task forces organized between 1983 and 1993, thirteen dealt with foreign and domestic humanitarian emergencies. Of the thirteen, eight were conducted in 1992 and 1993.<sup>13</sup> USEUCOM's Chief of Staff, Lt. General Chelberg recently stated that, "The wave of the future will be putting together task forces that will be able to respond to crisis management or humanitarian missions."<sup>14</sup>

## THE PROBLEM

Why is the military being called on more frequently to respond to humanitarian crises and what affect does this have on the military? Though FEMA is trying to rely less on military assistance, the severity of some recent crises (Hurricane Andrew and the Mid-West floods) overwhelmed the capacities of other agencies and led FEMA or the President to call for military help. The General Accounting Office (GAO) studied the question of what the military's role in domestic emergency management should be and concluded that it should be short-term and under civilian direction. "The military is ill-suited for and does not want core domestic emergency duties owing to constitutional restrictions ... incompatibility of defense training and missions with disaster response functions and problems in dividing military assets ... particularly during periods of heavy deployment abroad."<sup>15</sup>

Most of the U.S. military's humanitarian operations in recent years have been overseas in support of OFDA and NGO operations. These organizations are very interested in continued military engagement. "Military forces can do a great deal of good because they bring with them an organization and structure no civilian organization can match."<sup>16</sup> Particularly important are the military's ability to do the following: impose security, provide large scale transport and logistics support to remote locations, and provide command and control capabilities, as well as temporary shelters and acute medical care.<sup>17</sup> Yet, "The military has embraced its relief missions with some ambivalence."<sup>18</sup>

So what is the problem? Military analysts present many reasons why armed forces should not be used for humanitarian operations. Armed forces are organized, trained and equipped for combat. "The skills needed to feed hungry people in Africa or build tent cities for hurricane victims are different from the skills needed for combat."<sup>19</sup> Utilizing only non-combat skills affects combat readiness. There are also concerns that utilization of the military for humanitarian operations will undermine support for combat-oriented spending by leading planners to enhance support units at the expense of combat ones.<sup>20</sup> The issue of readiness arose last year when the Army declared two divisions had fallen below the desired readiness state due to use of operating funds to pay for operations other than war. As a result, scheduled training could not be performed.

In addition to the issue of readiness, there is the negative impact on morale of repeated temporary deployments overseas. This is compounded by the fact that the burden of deployment for humanitarian operations is not well distributed. Such deployments have repeatedly called predominately for Military Police, engineers, medical personnel, airlift and Special Forces units.<sup>21</sup> Morale affects personnel retention rates and thus overall military effectiveness.

Finally, former USAID official Andrew Natsios cautions that the military is the most expensive instrument available for humanitarian operations and advises that military assets only be used "when they have a comparative advantage over other relief



organizations and can be given a clear mission with a specific exit strategy.<sup>22</sup>

#### HOW TO HANDLE HUMANITARIAN OPERATIONS

The question of how to handle humanitarian operations is just one issue in the larger effort currently underway to reinvent the U.S. Government, to make it leaner and more effective. It is in this context of improving efficiency of government that I will examine three options for the military's role in humanitarian operations at home and abroad.

##### Option 1: Virtually Eliminate Any Military Role

This is the approach likely to be recommended by the Roles and Missions Commission, which is looking at further delineating the military's role in providing humanitarian services.<sup>23</sup> It is also the direction recommended by the GAO<sup>24</sup> and being pursued by FEMA with respect to domestic emergencies. With the exception of the Army Corps of Engineers, which still has prime responsibility for ESF #3 (Public Works), FEMA now regards military assets as a resource of last resort. Military assets, with the exception of unique airlift and all-terrain vehicle capabilities, would be called upon only after civilian/commercial capabilities had been fully utilized.<sup>25</sup> For humanitarian emergencies overseas, this approach runs counter to the current trend. For relief officials, the lesson learned last autumn in Rwanda is that they "need more logistical support from the world's armies."<sup>26</sup>

There are three arguments in favor of this approach. First

is the question of whether the military is an appropriate instrument. Some believe, "Western military establishments are currently not prepared or trained to deal effectively with the diverse cultural and economic challenges associated with humanitarian operations in developing countries."<sup>27</sup> Second, in an era of shrinking budgets, the military should focus on its main mission, preparation for combat, in order to avoid becoming a hollow force. To do humanitarian missions effectively, the military would have to introduce changes in four core areas: doctrine, organization, training and equipment.<sup>28</sup> Third, other agencies (FEMA and OFDA) are already organized and funded to conduct humanitarian operations.

Arguments against reducing the military's involvement in humanitarian operations focus mainly on resources. Like the military, the budgets and staffs of civilian agencies are also shrinking. An efficient government cannot arbitrarily refuse to utilize assets already bought and paid for simply because they have been allocated to a particular part of that government. The military must contribute to operations desired by the American people, otherwise it will lose the public support it needs to justify military spending.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, a speaker at the National War College warned that the military must remain relevant to society.

#### Option 2: Maintain the Status Quo

The military is called upon as needed to provide specialized capabilities (security, air transport, and engineering) for humanitarian operations. This is done usually only after civilian

resources have been exhausted or proven to be inadequate to the task. It is the increasing frequency of such calls, combined with growing demands on shrinking military resources, which raises the question of whether the status quo is desirable.

Some argue that there is really no incompatibility between the combat role that soldiers are trained for and the skills needed to conduct humanitarian operations.<sup>30</sup> Others argue that there are differences but that the roles the military is usually called upon to fulfill in humanitarian operations are limited to traditional military functions such as providing base security, transporting supplies and providing engineering and medical services. This camp concludes that participation in such operations provides the benefits of realistic training.<sup>31</sup>

Another reason for maintaining the status quo is that it involves relatively less risk than the more revolutionary alternatives of either limiting or expanding the military's role in humanitarian operations. Evolutionary change is likely to be much more acceptable from a bureaucratic perspective.

The downside of maintaining the status quo approach is that the events which spark humanitarian operations are an independent variable. If the number of humanitarian operations continues to increase, the strains on military training, combat readiness and morale will increase, leading to the possibility of a return to the hollow force problem of the late 1970s. To the extent that humanitarian tasks require skills different from those taught for combat, and with combat skills becoming more specialized as the

battlefield goes high tech, soldiers are becoming task saturated.<sup>32</sup> They increasingly need to specialize in order to do their jobs effectively. Humanitarian operations are no exception. Soldiers need special training for operations other than war.

Option 3: Develop a Special Force for Humanitarian Operations

"We're the nation's 9-1-1 force, so our concern is not that we're doing these humanitarian missions ... our only concern is (that) ... we have the resources to accomplish the mission."<sup>33</sup> That statement by Major General Thomas Wilkerson reflects the fact that both the National Security Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement and the National Military Strategy indicate that there will continue to be a great demand for the military to provide emergency assistance and to ameliorate human suffering at home and abroad.<sup>34 35</sup> These documents reflect the broad agreement in the United States to intervene to provide humanitarian aid in almost any crisis.<sup>36</sup>

The military resists the creation of specially designated units because such specialization reduces the reservoir of conventional forces available for worldwide duty.<sup>37</sup> Also, since additional funding for special units is probably doubtful at best, the combat arms would lose resources to new units. Aside from the question of resources, greater reliance on the military for help in humanitarian emergencies runs the risk of increasing the military's involvement in traditionally civilian policy areas. We must be cognizant of the example such a move would set for third countries, such as those in South America and elsewhere which are struggling,

with our encouragement, to reduce the domestic roles their militaries play. We need to be concerned about setting an example which could undermine our policy of encouraging the spread of democracy.<sup>38</sup>

On the other hand, development of a force dedicated to conducting humanitarian operations, would overcome many of the shortcomings identified with use of conventional military forces for such purposes. This approach would be consistent with the Army's "Force XXI" desire to "divest the division of tasks that distract it from its core function."<sup>39</sup> Doctrine, training, mentality and equipment could all be geared to the demands of humanitarian work. For example, conventional medical teams have deployed on humanitarian operations without appropriate supplies such as vaccines, oral rehydration salts and pediatric supplies.<sup>40</sup> Such a force could exercise with OFDA and NGOs to enhance coordination and effectiveness. Currently some units are conducting such exercises at Camp Pendleton,<sup>41</sup> but it is a distraction from regular unit training and personnel once trained quickly move on to other units because humanitarian operations are not a career fast track and the benefit is largely lost.<sup>42</sup>

#### RECOMMENDATION

I recommend the third option, creation of a specially trained and equipped force. Trying to eliminate the military's involvement in humanitarian operations would be like fighting the tide. As long as the American people support humanitarian operations and the

military has the physical assets capable of conducting such operations, the military will be called upon to participate. The status quo, is a sub-optimal solution because soldiers are being asked to be masters of ever more trades when each is becoming more specialized. Some task will suffer. There is a risk that it will be the core combat skills.

Creation of a specialized humanitarian force within the military structure would be consistent with the core management principles underpinning the drive to reinvent government, namely organize by mission rather than by turf, create a culture around a mission and have each organization pursue its fundamental purpose.<sup>43</sup> While specialization is an important attribute, humanitarian operations are only one type of specialized function the military will be called upon to perform in the future. Therefore, it is important to avoid creating overly specialized organizations and proliferating command structures.

A humanitarian operations force should contribute significantly toward achievement of each of the following objectives:

- 1) Reduce the drain humanitarian operations currently place on the time and resources of combat units (both active duty and reserves). A dedicated force not counted upon for combat duty would address this.

- 2) Enhance the effectiveness of military support to humanitarian operations. Development of doctrine, training with OFDA and NGOs and creation of a force staffed with engineers, logisticians,

medical personnel and military police should accomplish this.

3) Be able quickly and effectively to support combat units in case of war. If combat skills are now considered generally applicable to humanitarian operations, the same should be true in reverse provided basic training is the same, there are occasional rotations of personnel into regular combat units and supplemental combat equipment is available. The Coast Guard provides an excellent model. Its employment in ordinary non-combat roles does not detract from its readiness to perform combat missions in war.<sup>44</sup>

4) Be perceived as being detached from the U.S. security policy apparatus. This is important to alleviate any impression the military is increasing its role in domestic civil affairs. Overseas, this would be helpful in overcoming reluctance of some nations (e.g., Bangladesh) to accept help from the U.S. military.<sup>45</sup> Again, the Coast Guard as well as the Army Corps of Engineers provide an example of organizations sufficiently detached from U.S. security policy to be accepted as not posing any threat to the sovereignty of other nations where they operate.<sup>46</sup>

5) Remain sufficiently within the military command structure to be able to call on specialty assets, such as airlift, which would not be practical to dedicate to a special humanitarian force.

6) Minimize cost. This would entail minimizing new equipment acquisition, doctrinal development efforts and headquarters duplication.

Given the above objectives, I would suggest that the

Department of Defense consider incorporating humanitarian operations units into the Army Corps of Engineers. The Corps of Engineers is already a lead organization in the Federal Response Plan, has already worked out doctrine for emergency humanitarian relief operations, has been well accepted by foreign countries and possesses much of the equipment humanitarian units would need. With its mission of developing inland and coastal waterways under increasing attack by environmentalists, and its budget for such activities under the knife,<sup>47</sup> the Corps might welcome the increased public support which should accompany a higher profile humanitarian mission.

Alternatively, humanitarian units could be attached to the Special Operations Command. There they would be much more integrated into the traditional military structure. However, they would also be more clearly an instrument of U.S. security policy. I am also concerned that doctrine and mission focus of humanitarian and Special Operations units would be too dissimilar for one command to accommodate.



## ENDNOTES

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